

Sharon Simpson Hall of Fame Story - Class of 2016

Do you remember when you first learned to swim? Were you prodigy or a late bloomer? For you late bloomers, Sharon Simpson is an example to follow. She was twenty years old when she first managed to stay on top of the water, taught by her husband, the late Jerry Simpson, an outstanding Masters swimmer, butterfly specialist, and overall swimming coach. Jerry encouraged her to move on to other coaches so she could learn different perspectives and techniques, but she refused until she could swim a mile. "I actually had to swim more than a mile," she says, "since there was lightning and we had to get out of the pool before I was finished. So I got back in and started over."

Growing up in Saskatchewan, Canada, Sharon spent seventh and eighth grades in a one-room schoolhouse. Those were the days when girls' and women's sports were an afterthought, and her athletic outlets were running sports like track and softball. Sharon's winner's attitude was built in track; in her entire life she lost only one running race. Once she learned to swim, she competed, specializing in breaststroke and IM, until her knees gave out.

Doing the whole mile over is the way Sharon has always approached things. She's not satisfied with partial success, an attitude has been evident for the 45 years she's spent as a swimming coach. She and Jerry started the South East Metro Sharks (SEMS) swimming club in 1971, and she began to build the Masters team in 1991. Starting with one swimmer, the program expanded to fifteen the first year and presently includes around 30 swimmers, ranging in age from twenty- to seventy-year-olds. It's become one of the strongest in Minnesota. Two years after SEMS Masters was founded, they finished 12th overall among small teams at the Long Course National Championships at the UMN Natatorium.

Sharon was the coach when Judy Anderson Lallier, another 2016 Minnesota Masters Hall of Fame inductee, set world records in two consecutive years swimming for SEMS: the Long Course 200 IM first in the 30-34 age group in 1993 and then in the 35-39 age group in 1994.

To be a great coach, you need to like people, and Sharon will tell you that she coaches because swimmers are wonderful folks to know. She prides herself on her eclectic approach to coaching and her focus on individual improvement. When she goes to a clinic, she looks for one important point to bring home to her swimmers. As a result, SEMS workouts are varied and interesting. Sharon believes that Masters Swimming is for everyone, and she welcomes world-record holders and new swimmers. In keeping with her ecumenical approach, she runs two workouts, one with shorter distances than the other, so that both beginners and would-be channel crossers can get the kind of training they want.

The Minnesota Masters Swimming community, including swimmers, coaches, and volunteers, has stars in every category. Sharon is one of those stars, a model for the coaches who help us swimmers get better while we have fun. She shows no signs of slowing down, great news for Minnesota Masters Swimming and for future aspirants to the Hall of Fame.